

SCRIPTURAL VIEW
OF THE
MODE OF BAPTISM.

IN A

Letter to an Inquirer.

RICHMOND:
PRINTED BY J. MACFARLAN.

1832.

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SCRIPTURAL VIEW OF BAPTISM.

In a Letter to an Inquirer.



MY DEAR SIR,—

Our late conversation on the rite of Baptism has led me to examine the subject anew; and I here send you the results of my inquiries. In preparing them for your inspection, it has been my object to collect the lights which the Scriptures afford on the questions in hand, and present them as briefly as the nature of the subject will admit. I have availed myself, in performing this duty, of the helps furnished by others—as it is not an original essay, but a clear, connected and scriptural view of this ordinance, which I wish to give you.—The subject, you are aware, is a controversial one; and so many assertions and arguments have been warmly reiterated in defence of favorite opinions, that it is, perhaps, impossible to clear it of difficulties without giving the discussion a controversial *form*. But I will endeavor to exclude from it the controversial *spirit*. In pointing out what appears to me erroneous in the opinions or practices of others, I shall use plainness of speech, but no expressions respecting them, except such as are dictated by charity and christian courtesy.

The questions proposed for consideration, are—*In what mode is Christian Baptism to be administered?—and who are the proper subjects of this ordinance?* In connexion

with the remarks which follow, in answer to these inquiries, I must request you to have your Bible before you and to examine the passages to which reference is made. You will agree with me, that the Scriptures are our only unerring and safe guide on all questions of duty.

Baptism is the initiatory rite, or seal of membership, in the Church of Christ. It was instituted as such by the Lord Jesus. Those to whom it is to be administered are to be baptized into or unto the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Water only is to be used in administering this rite. On these points Christians are generally agreed.

This rite is duly administered either by *sprinkling*, *affusion*, or *immersion*. The particular mode of administering it, is not regarded by a large majority of Protestant Christians, as essential to the ordinance. This view of it, as you know, is opposed by a class of Christians, respectable for their numbers and piety, who consider *immersion* as the only *proper mode* of Baptism, or rather as the only proper Baptism. In my view there are *strong and important reasons* against adopting this opinion, or making *immersion* the *exclusive*, or even the common mode of performing this rite. Some of these reasons I proceed to state.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT DOES NOT TEACH THAT IMMERSION IS THE ONLY BAPTISM; *nor can it be determined from this book that the ordinance was administered by immersion in any case.*

Neither Christ, nor his Apostles, have commanded Christians to be baptized by *total immersion*. No such command is found in the New Testament. Under the Mosaic

dispensation the various rites and purifications were *exactly described*. The *precise manner* in which they were to be performed was pointed out. But no command is given as to the *mode* of Baptism under the Gospel dispensation. Its *form*, or *mode*, is not prescribed. Nor are there any instances recorded in the New Testament, from which it can be determined, that those who were baptized, were *completely immersed in water*.—These assertions, I do not presume, will pass with you for *proofs*; the *evidences* of their truth are found in the language used on this subject, and in the circumstances in which this rite was administered by the Apostles.

By those who regard immersion as the only proper Baptism, great stress is laid on the meaning of the word, βαπτίζω, rendered in our translation, *baptize*. An examination of the examples given below, will, I think, satisfy any one that this word does not always signify *total immersion*. It comes from βαπτω, which with their derivatives, are used in about one hundred places in the New Testament. Their primary meaning as used in these scriptures, is *cleansing*. They are generally employed by the sacred writers to denote the *effect*, and not the *mode*, of cleansing.

In Mark 7: 4. βαπτισμος, *baptism* is rendered *washing*. The Evangelist says, the Pharisees hold many other usages, “as *baptisms* of cups and pots and brazen vessels and *beds*.” “The common version has *tables*; for what reason I am unable to say; as the word κλινη uniformly denotes a couch to sleep on, or to recline upon at meals. Now the baptism, or ceremonial purification of cups and

pots and brazen vessels and couches might have been performed in different ways. The cups and pots and brazen vessels might, possibly, be immersed all over in water;”* but this is not probable, as the writer remarks, whose language we have quoted. For in Num. 19: 18, special directions are given for cleansing vessels ceremonially unclean. The particular mode of it is exactly prescribed. “*And a clean person*” (says the divine lawgiver) “*shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it upon the tent, and upon all the vessels, and upon the persons that were there,*” &c. Compare with this passage Lev. 14: 7. Num. 3: 7. and Heb. 9: 13, 19, 21 verses. Here then the word, *baptism*, does not mean *immersion*, but a ceremonial cleansing *by sprinkling*. This was the prescribed and most common mode of performing the rite.

Again, in Hebrews 9: 10, the Apostle speaks of divers washings; in the original it is *divers baptisms*. “These were not all performed in one way, and *certainly not by immersion*. The adjective, rendered *divers*, signifies *different, of various kinds, dissimilar*. These *divers baptisms* or ablutions, doubtless included all the different ceremonial cleansings prescribed in the Mosaic law.—These were performed in different ways, but chiefly *by sprinkling consecrated water*.”† This is put beyond all doubt by the directions quoted and referred to above. And the conclusion is unavoidable, that *baptism*, in the text under consideration, signifies *sprinkling* and cleansing in various ways, and *not immersion*.

In John 2: 6, you may see the provision made for this ceremonial cleansing, or washing, on the occasion of a

*Dr Woods.

† Dr Woods.

wedding feast. Six water pots of stone were prepared containing two or three firkins, or as is supposed about eight or ten gallons, apiece; a very suitable provision for sprinkling the vessels and couches, or washing the hands of the guests, but certainly not very convenient for *immersing the whole body in water*. For it appears from the narrative, that these water pots were standing, not in a *private* apartment of the house, but in a public place, a room where the members of the family and the guests were together.

Again, in Matthew 26: 23, we have another example of the use of this word. "He that *dippeth his hand* with me in the dish." The word translated dippeth is *εμβαψας*, from *βαπτω*, which there are good reasons to believe has a more definite and forcible sense than its derivative *βαπτίζω*.—But even the original word does not always mean *to immerse*. It can not, I think, be used in this sense in the passage before us. For "whatever liquid the dish contained, it cannot be supposed that Judas plunged his hand all over in that liquid. Nothing more can be meant than that he took the bitter herbs, which were eaten at the Passover, or other articles of food, and with his fingers dipped them in the sauce prepared."†—You will observe that Matthew says—*Judas dipped his hand*—and Mark that *he himself dipped, or baptized*, as the word is rendered in other places. Now unless we suppose that Judas *immersed his hand all over* in a dish, from which some kind of liquid or sauce was taken with their food, we can not believe that *βαπτίζω*, or even *βαπτω* always signifies *immersion*. I admit that

† Woods.

it sometimes has this meaning, but this certainly is not its usual sense in the Scriptures.

We have further proof on this subject in the record of a Baptism which the Apostle Paul has given us. In 1 Cor. 10: 1, 2, addressing the Christians at Corinth, he says—"Moreover, Brethren, I would not that you should be ignorant, how that all our Fathers *were baptized under the cloud*, and all passed through the sea; and *were all baptized* unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea." Of this transaction Moses has left a very particular account. In describing the journey of the Israelites, (Exodus 13: 21, 22,) he says; "The Lord went before them by day, in a pillar of cloud, to lead them in the way, and by night, in a pillar of fire to give them light; to go by day and night. He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people." And in chapter 14: 19--20, he says "The Angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed, and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them. And it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel; and it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other, all the night.—And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left."

In this narrative, remarkable for giving the *particulars*

of the transaction, we have a statement of the following facts: God, or the Angel of God, went before the people in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night, in their journey from Succoth to the margin of the Red Sea, where Pharoah and his army overtook them: The Angel of God then removed from before and went behind the Israelites with the pillar of the cloud, which was a source of peculiar light to *them*, and of peculiar darkness to the Egyptians:—The waters of the Red Sea were divided so as to be a wall on the right hand and on the left to the Israelites, who went through the sea upon the dry land.—These are the facts which Moses has recorded, and there is certainly nothing in them from which any one can infer, that the people of Israel *were immersed*. The historian tells us that Pharoah and his army and horses were immersed all over in the Red Sea, but not a word about the *immersion* of the Israelites. They, as appears from the history, were not even *sprinkled* by the *Red Sea*, but went over on dry land between two walls of water.

How, then, were they baptized? In the account given by Moses, though very particular, there seems to be an omission of a fact noticed by the Psalmist. In the 77th Psalm, (from the 16th to the 20th verse,) he says—“The waters saw thee, O God, the waters saw thee; they were afraid: the depths also were troubled. The clouds poured out water; the skies sent out a sound: thine arrows also went abroad. The voice of thy thunder was in the heaven: the lightnings lightened the world: the earth trembled and shook. Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known. Thou leddest thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

Here, if any where in the Scriptures, we have an account of the Baptism mentioned by Paul. And how was it? It appears that when the pillar of cloud passed from before to the rear of the Israelites, the rain descended from the cloud in its passage. The marginal and literal translation of the 17th verse, is, *the cloud was poured forth with waters*--that is, *it rained*.--Now it is clear that this is the only account of this Baptism, contained in the Bible; and it is equally clear that it must have been *by the sprinkling* of rain; certainly not *by immersion*. For the fancy that the cloud in some way or other embosomed the Israelites by resting upon them, and enveloped them as water envelops a person immersed in it, will not be maintained. Such a fancy might appear well enough in poetry, "but it has an aspect scarcely serious enough to claim a place in a theological discussion."§

As we proceed in the examination of the scriptural use of the word βαπτίζω, baptize, you will observe that I am not endeavoring, in this part of the discussion *to define it*--or to give its true and full signification. My object, at present is to show that it does not, and can not, mean *immersion*, as used in many places in the New Testament. This appears perfectly obvious from the passages already examined. But as the sacred use of the word has, in my view, been misunderstood, and as it is earnestly contended that it ought to be translated IMMERSE, and that it can not be translated any thing else consistently with truth, I must refer you to other examples. Let us then make a new translation of a few texts, and see if it will bear this meaning.

‡ Dwight.

If we translate the word baptize, *immerse*, we shall then read, in Matt. 3: 11, "I indeed, *immerse* you in water, but he that cometh after me . . . shall *immerse* you in the Holy Ghost and in fire." The gross impropriety of this language appears to me too palpable to need remark. If John says, "I *immerse* you in water," his language is plain and intelligible. But *to immerse one in the Holy Ghost*, is an action of which I can form no idea. If it mean any thing, it is contrary to fact. For sinners are not immersed in the Holy Ghost, but the Holy Ghost is poured out upon them as we learn from Acts 2: 17, and other places. *To immerse one in fire*, is, if possible, still more shocking; as the action seems to resemble "the abominations of the heathen." see 2 Kings 16: 3.—In Matt. 20: 22, with our new translation, we must read, "Are ye able . . . to be *immersed* in the *immersion* that I am *immersed* in?" This, surely, is unintelligible. It is true, the word is here used metaphorically to denote suffering, but the nature of the metaphor shows that it does not always mean *total immersion*, or any act resembling it.—In Luke 11: 38, we must read, "And when the Pharisee saw it (i. e. when he saw Jesus sit down to meat) he *marvelled* that he had not first *immersed* [himself] before dinner." And why should he *marvel*—why be astonished at this? Was it the practice of the Jews to plunge themselves into water, all over, two or three times a day, just before taking their usual meals? If not, why *marvel*? That the Jews sometimes bathed themselves for purposes of cleanliness and health, and washed themselves in water, when infected with leprosy, is admitted by all. But if any one has discovered that it was their *daily* custom to *immerse* themselves all

over in water before eating, it is a new discovery. Besides, I can not conceive how a man can thus immerse himself, all over, in one of the water pots containing but eight or ten gallons, which constituted the provision for the ordinary purposes of purification, according to "the manner of the purifying of the Jews." John 2: 6. I ask, then,—is the word *baptize* more properly rendered *immerse*, and does consistency with truth require this translation? I leave the question to your decision, and that of every one who can read the English version of the Scriptures.

According to our new translation, the commission given to the Apostles, as recorded in Matt. 28: 19, is, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, *immersing* them into or unto the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." When I read of an immersion in water the sense is plain and obvious—but to *immerse* a man in a name, or UNTO *a name* (as the preposition ought to be translated) is something which I can not understand. I know not what it means. Can you read this commission, and believe that *immersion* constitutes the sum of Baptism?—Again Christians are said to be *baptized* into the death of Jesus Christ; that is, they are *immersed—into the death* of a person. And what does this mean? To me it is mysterious and inexplicable language. But if we retain the word, *baptize*, the text is intelligible. It teaches us that as Christ made a sacrifice of his life for us—so must we make a sacrifice of our sins for him; put them to death; "crucify the old man, that the body of sin may be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin," but glorify him by a holy obedience to his commands. Rom. 6: 4, 6. Again, With our new translation, we must read

1 Cor. 12: 13, "For by one Spirit are we all *immersed* into one body." Christians are *immersed*, not in water, (according to our translation) but *into a body—and all into ONE BODY!* This appears to be a strange expression to come from the mouth of an Apostle. After due examination of it, it will not, it can not, I think, be maintained or even supposed that the word, *baptize*, signifies a *total immersion in water*.

Many other passages of Scripture might be quoted to illustrate the point before us; but the above are sufficient, and more than sufficient, to show that the words, *baptize* and *immerse* are not synonymous; that Christian Baptism as taught in the New Testament is something different from the act of immersing the body in water. If any thing can be made plain from the Scriptures, it is plain that baptism and immersion are not one and the same thing. And if the words, baptize and immerse, are not terms of the same import, then, surely, the command to *baptize* disciples, is not a command to *immerse them*. THERE IS THEN NO COMMAND in the New Testament addressed to Christians to practice TOTAL IMMERSION.—And this fact is in my view a strong reason against considering it essential to Baptism, or even practicing it on ordinary occasions.

You will say, perhaps, "that if the word *sprinkle*, or *pour*, be substituted for *immerse* in the new translation, it will not exhibit the true sense of the texts above quoted. *We are all SPRINKLED into one body*, is also unintelligible." This I readily admit. Nobody pretends that *baptize* ought to be translated by the word *sprinkle*. And it will be soon enough to offer this reply, when something like argument

is arrayed against the honesty of the translators, because they did not use the word *sprinkle* to describe the rite in question. Such a translation is recommended by no one. In my view Baptism is something more than the act of sprinkling or pouring water on the subject, or immersing him in water. These are merely the *mode* or *form* of a rite which implies other things; things better expressed by the word, *baptize*, than any other in our language. And here is the difference. I consider these acts as the *mode* of performing a solemn rite; others appear to regard the *mode* as constituting the *very essence* of the rite itself; that is, the external act is the whole of a spiritual rite. And if the act be not performed precisely according to the pattern, the whole is defective—it must be repeated till the thing is done in exact conformity to a rule, which is not found in the Scriptures. The word, *baptize*, signifies more than immersion, or the application of water in any way. Its signification, as used to describe this ordinance, will be presented in another part of this discussion.

You have before you, in the texts we have examined, proofs of the position, that the command *to baptize*, is not a command *to immerse* people completely in water; and that there is no command like this in the Bible. Let us now examine another class of texts and see if they afford evidence, that Christians were immersed in the days of Christ and his Apostles.

It has been supposed that the multitudes whom John baptized in the wilderness, were immersed all over in water, *because they were baptized in or at the river Jordan*. Without noticing the character of John's baptism,

which was previous to the introduction of the gospel dispensation and before the command was given to make disciples of, and baptize, all nations, we may remark that it is by no means certain that John baptized the multitudes by immersion. The supposition appears very incredible. These multitudes who came to hear him, could not know before they assembled, that he would baptize them; and would not prepare a proper dress in which to be immersed. It can not be suspected that they were immersed without some covering. To have immersed them with their clothes on with no opportunity to change them after coming out of the water, would have exposed them to certain disease and death.*

The circumstance mentioned in John 3: 23, affords no decisive evidence in favor of immersion. "John was baptizing in Ænon, *because there was much water there.*" The words rendered *much water*, are *υδατα πολλα*; literally *many waters*,—i. e. many springs or streams of water. "In such a country as Palestine, John found it of special importance, as any Christian missionary would at the present day, to collect the multitude in a place where there was an abundant supply of water. This he knew to be necessary for their accommodation, and even their subsistence." A large supply was indispensable to meet the ordinary wants of such a concourse of people; and this supply could be obtained in only a few places in that country. Who, then, can suppose the waters of Ænon were resorted to for the simple purpose of *baptizing*, when three thousand were, in one day, baptized by the Apostles, even at Jerusalem, in the dryest season

*Dwight.

of the year? Surely, this circumstance proves nothing respecting the mode of baptism.†

Nor does the language of the Evangelist in describing the baptism of Jesus, prove that he was immersed. Matthew says (ch. 3: 16,) that Jesus when he was baptized, "*went up from the water.*" In our translation it is—"he *went up straight way out of the water.*" Every Greek scholar knows that the word *απο*, here translated, *out of*, generally signifies *from*, and cannot mean *out of*, except by accident. If the Evangelist intended to describe Christ's rising out of the water, he certainly has not used appropriate language. But if Jesus went merely to the edge of the river without stepping into the water at all, the expression of the Evangelist—*he went up from the water*—is perfectly natural. It describes his ascending the banks of Jordan, which were of considerable height above the water: Of course he ascended them when he left the margin of the river. There is, then, nothing in the account of this baptism, which proves, or even renders it probable, that Jesus was immersed all over in the water.

The same remarks apply to the account of the baptism of the eunuch, recorded in Acts 8: 38. "They went down both *into* the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they come up *out of* the water, &c." The words translated *into*--and *out of*--as every one knows, acquainted with the Greek language, usually mean *to* and *from*. I know not why the translators have here rendered them, *into* and *out of*. The phrase may be more literally rendered, "they des-

cended *to* the water, and ascended *from* it.”—Besides, the argument triumphantly urged from this passage, proves too much. If, going down “*into* the water,” proves that the eunuch was immersed all over in it, it also proves that Philip was also immersed in the same way; for they both went down “*into* the water” and “*came up out of it*,” as the translators have expressed it. Total immersion then can not be proved from this text.

From an examination of the language used by the writers in describing the baptisms we have considered, it appears evident that there is nothing in the account of them, no circumstance mentioned or alluded to, by which we can know that they *were immersed*. And if there is no evidence that *they* were immersed, it will not, I think, be pretended that we have any proof that the three thousand at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, or Lydia, or the jailor and his household, or any others mentioned in the New Testament, were baptized by *immersion*.—The cases we have considered are those on which the greatest stress has been laid by advocates of total immersion; I am therefore prepared to say, that

The New Testament does not contain even CIRCUMSTANTIAL evidence by which we can know, that Christians were immersed all over in water, in the time of the Apostles. If this were the mode then practiced, it is very remarkable that no circumstance is mentioned or alluded to, respecting the *change of the clothing* of those who were baptized. Other circumstances are detailed very minutely; but in not a single instance among all the cases mentioned by the inspired historians, is there a word or intimation

concerning the adjustment or change of apparel; which certainly was no unimportant circumstance in preparing for a total immersion. The case of the eunuch on which great stress has been laid in support of this mode, illustrates my remark. The other circumstances attending his baptism are given in detail.—He is riding in his chariot and reading a prophecy of Isaiah; Philip joins him, takes a seat in the carriage and expounds to him the portion of Scripture he was reading. The eunuch professes his faith in Christ, and when they came to a fountain, or running brook, requests baptism. The eunuch commands the driver to stop. (They probably had no water in the chariot, and no convenient vessel to bring it from the fountain.) They, therefore, go down from the chariot to the water, and Philip baptizes him, and they come up from it. How particularly the circumstances are narrated. But there is no intimation that the eunuch changed his apparel, immediately before or after his baptism; nor is it even hinted that he took his seat in his carriage and pursued his journey, wearing the clothes dripping wet, in which he had just been plunged into a river.—These remarks on the silence of the historian respecting this circumstance, apply to every other case of baptism recorded in the New Testament. And the inference is unavoidable that *immersion is not supported by circumstantial evidence.*

I will now invite your attention to the circumstance which, as it appears to me, has been the occasion of erroneous views of this rite. We have seen that the word, *baptize*, as used by the writers of the New Testament, does not, in many places, signify to *immerse*. It is admitted that the word is sometimes, but not always, used in this

sense by *classical* writers. The difference of opinion and practice in the Church, as it respects this ordinance, has arisen then from the following fact:

It has been supposed that the word, baptize, is used in the same sense in the Scriptures as it is in the GREEK CLASSICS.—I say that this has been *supposed*—for I have never seen proof that its *Scriptural* use corresponds with *classical* usage. On the contrary, it cannot be denied that the sacred writers have employed the word to express ideas which were unknown to the heathen authors, from whose language they borrowed it. And this is by no means an extraordinary case. Many similar to it might be mentioned. The word, *virtue*, (*αρετη*) in the New Testament, has a signification widely different from that in which it was used in the profane writings of the Apostolic age. The word rendered *Supper*, (*δειπνον*) used to denote the other Christian ordinance, affords an illustration to the point. This word ordinarily signifies a *principal meal*; but in the New Testament it is used to denote the morsel of bread taken in eating the Lord's Supper. If our beloved brethren infer from the classical use of the word *baptize*, that immersion constitutes the only baptism—why should they not with more reason conclude, that nothing less than a *principal meal* can suffice for the proper celebration of the Lord's supper? But this we know is contrary to the design of the ordinance. The Apostle (see 1 Cor. 11: 20,) charged the Corinthians with abusing it, by taking more food than the ordinance required. “Now if the word which denotes one Christian rite has a sense so widely different from its usual sense;” it surely is not extraordinary that it is so with the word which denotes

the other Christian rite. "If the word, *supper*, in reference to one rite, signifies, not a usual meal, but only a *very small quantity of bread*; why may not *baptize*, in reference to the other rite, signify, not a complete immersion in water, but the application of it in a small degree? This would present the two institutions in the same light. In the first; as bread and wine are used, not to nourish the body, but for *spiritual* purposes, as a *sign of spiritual blessings*, a very small quantity is sufficient. Indeed the Apostle decides, that a small quantity is better suited to the ends of the institution, than a large quantity. So in the other; as water is used, not to cleanse the body, but merely as a *sign of spiritual* purification; a small quantity of water *must be sufficient*;—as sufficient for the purposes of this ordinance, as a small quantity of bread and wine is for the purposes of the other. The nourishment of the body in the one case, and the cleansing of it in the other, being no part of the end to be answered; a large quantity either of bread or water can be of no use."*

I proceed to state, secondly, that

II. THERE ARE EVIDENCES AMOUNTING TO A HIGH DEGREE OF PROBABILITY, THAT THE APOSTLES ADMINISTERED BAPTISM BY SPRINKLING.—I admit that immersion may be *one mode* of Christian baptism, because the Scriptures do not prescribe, or limit, *the quantity* of water which may be used in this ordinance. But while we desire to have more fellowship with those respected brethren who adhere to this mode *exclusively*, our admission ought not to be urged as an argument to persuade us to practice their mode; because we believe it *to be unauthorized by Scrip-*

ture. The considerations which convince me that the Apostles baptized by sprinkling, furnish an *important* reason against adopting their practice. The evidences of this, I have called *probable*, because we have no direct command, given by Christ or his Apostles in the New Testament, as to the *mode* of this rite; and no evangelical historian has described the mode which they practiced. It would therefore be unbecoming to say, that we *absolutely know* that they adopted this or that mode. But if we have no *direct* testimony on the question, there is a great amount of *circumstantial* evidence, which to an intelligent inquirer may be highly satisfactory.

1. *The usual mode of performing ceremonial purification among the Jews, was by sprinkling consecrated water, or blood, on the persons or things to be purified.* This is abundantly proved by the texts to which I have already referred, (in Num. 8: 7—14: 7, and 19: 18; and Heb. 9: 10, 13, 19 and 21.) And these purifications the Apostle calls *Baptisms*. With this mode of baptism the Jews had been acquainted from the time of Moses. This was their usual mode, and they were no doubt very scrupulous and exact as to the form or manner of performing it; as they were of the other ceremonial rites which pertained to their religion. The baptism of John is not spoken of by the Evangelists, as a *new* or *strange* rite; but there is a strong intimation (in John 1: 25) that the ordinance was well known among the Jews before his time. They were in the habit of receiving proselytes from the gentiles, to their Church, and as all gentiles were to them esteemed ceremonially unclean, they were *baptized*. And this was no doubt done by sprinkling water upon them; *because*

this was the most usual mode of performing ceremonial purifications.—It has been doubted, as I am aware, whether they baptized proselytes—but of this fact there is abundant testimony. Dr Rees says:—“We find it to have been the custom of the Jews solemnly to baptize, as well as circumcise, all their proselytes.” . . . “The Jewish writers, without one dissenting voice, allow the fact that the practice of Jewish baptism obtained *before* and *at*, as well as *after* our Saviour’s time.” “And the infants of proselytes were also baptized, both male and female.” Maimonides, a celebrated Jewish writer, says, “In all ages, whensoever any gentile was willing to enter into the covenant, and to be gathered under the wings of the Shechinah, and to undertake the yoke of the law, he was bound to have circumcision, and baptism and the peace offering; and if it were a woman, baptism and the sacrifice. Baptism was in the desert before the giving of the law. If an Israelite take a gentile child, or find a gentile infant, and baptize him in the name of a proselyte, behold, he is a proselyte.” Pirie brings many testimonies to the same purpose from the Gemara, and the Talmud of Babylon, a book highly valued among the Jews. Indeed, the testimonies that this practice prevailed among the Jews, are so numerous and direct, that they can not be resisted; and they are not opposed by any counter testimony whatever. The only question is, what *mode* of baptism did they adopt?—And the answer is—that they, no doubt, adopted the most usual mode of performing ceremonial purifications; and this was by sprinkling.

The Rev. Pliny Fisk, late missionary of the American Board to Palestine, has recorded the testimony of a Jew

on this subject, which is entitled to consideration. While at Alexandria in Egypt, in 1822, he became acquainted with several Jews, one of whom, named Joseph, was from Salonica, a place famous for the number of its Jewish inhabitants. Joseph was a man of letters, and spoke and read five or six different languages. In reading the New Testament with him, they came to the account of Philip and the eunuch, and Mr Fisk asked him, if any such thing as baptism were known among the Jews. Joseph answered, "*that in ancient times when a stranger embraced the Jewish religion, he and his wife and children were all baptized; THE CEREMONY WAS PERFORMED BY SPRINKLING OR POURING A CUP OF WATER ON THE HEAD; and this was done seven times.*" This testimony is from a Jew who was educated in the East, near the land of his fathers. It is known that the Jews, since their captivity in Babylon, have been very jealous of every thing like innovation in their religion, and have scrupulously observed and transmitted its ceremonies and rites. It is neither probable, therefore, nor credible, that they have ever changed their mode of baptism. This, indeed, is not pretended; for the testimony of Joseph, which is supported by that of Maimonides is not contradicted. According to their own account of the matter, then, the *mode* of baptism among the Jews, *was by sprinkling.*

How then must the Apostles have understood the command to *baptize*? You will recollect that they were Jews, had been educated in the Jewish religion, and that their ideas and feelings and prejudices were all Jewish. Christ commands them to go and make proselytes in all nations, and to *baptize* them. He does not, as you have seen,

prescribe the mode of administering this ordinance. How, then, must they have understood it, and what mode would they adopt? To me, it appears evident that they adopted the mode usually practised in their own nation. Indeed so tenacious were they of their peculiar modes of performing religious rites, that it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have persuaded the Jewish converts to adopt a *new and strange mode* of baptism. Is it not then, in the highest degree, probable, *that they were baptized by sprinkling?*

2. The facts recorded in the New Testament afford light on this question. From the circumstances in which the multitudes were baptized by John, and the eunuch by Philip, as noticed above, the supposition that they were immersed is incredible. And it is still more incredible that the three thousand baptized at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, were immersed. The time of these baptisms was in summer; and there was no rain. The brook Kidron was dry, and there was no stream or fountain of water near Jerusalem, except Siloam in the southeast corner of the city. If there were private bathing houses, or cisterns, they no doubt belonged to the rich, few of whom were disposed to befriend the cause of Christ.—There is not the least intimation that they used such bathing places. And it is impossible that this great multitude, collected from various regions, many of them poor, who in the morning had no thought of being baptized, or even of hearing the gospel, could have been prepared with the changes of apparel necessary in the case of an immersion. Besides there was not sufficient time for this ritual service to be performed by immersion. On this day the Apostles

had met together. The Holy Spirit had been poured out on them so that they preached to people of many different countries in their own languages; the powerful effects of their preaching were noticed, and heavy accusations were brought against them. Peter undertook their defence and reasoned with them largely from the scriptures. Multitudes were awakened and inquired what they should do to be saved. Peter taught them the way of salvation.--“What is related in Acts 2: must be considered a very brief outline of the instruction he gave them; as appears from verse 40. Now all those miraculous operations of the Holy Spirit; all the discourses of the Apostles to people of many different countries; all the agitations and differences of opinion which took place among such a vast multitude; the discourse of Peter; the convictions and anxious inquiries of three thousand souls, with the particular instructions given them in regard to the way of salvation and the duties of a holy life—all these must have occupied a considerable portion of the day. It was the third hour, that is, nine o’clock in the morning, when some of the people, after having seen the effects produced by the effusion of the Spirit, accused the Apostles of being unduly excited by new wine. What has been mentioned could not have taken place in less than half the day; and they certainly could not have had more than half the day left for baptizing.” It is far more probable that three-fourths of the day had passed, before any of the converts were baptized. “But let it be supposed that the Apostles baptized the three thousand in five hours. This would make six hundred an hour; and for each apostle fifty an hour, or two hundred and fifty in five hours; that is but

little short of one a minute for each Apostle through the whole of that time.”* Now who can believe that they were baptized by immersion, without believing that the Lord worked wonders in this as in other occurrences of that memorable day, and that He miraculously multiplied the *hours and minutes*, and increased the *physical strength* of the Apostles, as he had on another occasion multiplied the loaves and fishes?—From these circumstances it appears *utterly impossible* that the Apostles immersed them in that part of the day which the history will allow us to consider as left for the purpose, after the other transactions mentioned. And if they were not immersed, which does not appear possible,—it is probable that they were baptized by sprinkling.

These remarks apply to the case of the jailor. Observe 1st, that he and his household were baptized in the *night*; 2d, the rite as is evident from the narrative, (Acts 16: 19 to 39) was administered in the outer prison; and 3d, they were baptized *immediately* after the jailor professed to believe. It appears from the history that these things were done within the limits of the prison. Look now at these three circumstances—the baptism was *in the night*, *in a prison*, and *immediately* after the jailor believed in Christ. That he and his household were immersed, is not in the least degree probable. The supposition that a river run through the prison, or that it contained a bath convenient for the purpose, is very *improbable*. Here then is strong circumstantial evidence that they were baptized, not by immersion, but by the usual mode of performing this rite in those times.

* Woods.

When the gentiles, in the house of Cornelius, believed the preaching of the gospel, (Acts 10:) and received the Holy Ghost, Peter asks—"can any man *forbid water* that these should not be baptized?" Please examine this expression. Does it not mean—*can any man forbid water to be brought?* Is not this the natural sense of the expression? And is it not very unnatural to make the Apostle mean—*can any man forbid us to go out to a river, or fountain of water?* Indeed, I know of no instance of baptism recorded by the sacred writers, the circumstances of which seem to be opposed to sprinkling. On the contrary they confirm the testimonies of the Jews respecting the mode which they practiced, and render it highly probable that the Apostles adopted the same.

III. IMMERSION DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE AN APPROPRIATE REPRESENTATION OF THE IMPORTANT TRUTH SYMBOLICALLY REPRESENTED BY BAPTISM. This remark leads me to speak of the design of this ordinance.

It is evident from the Scriptures that baptism was intended as a representation, addressed to the senses, of important truth. It denotes *spiritual purification*, a cleansing of the heart from the pollutions of sin; and implies obligations corresponding with this change. As the application of water is the universal mode of cleansing from external impurities: it is, on this account, an appropriate symbol of internal purification. Baptism then is not merely a duty to be performed—it is also a representation of most important truth, addressed to the senses of men, and well adapted to impress it upon their minds. You cannot, I think, have failed to observe, in witnessing the administration of this ordinance, how clearly, as a symbol,

it exhibits the doctrines of the entire depravity of our nature, and the necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit; and how it enforces these truths on the mind with the doctrines of faith in Christ, by whose mediation the Spirit is given, of justification by his righteousness, adoption, sanctification and salvation. How forcibly are these great fundamental truths of Christianity held forth, and as it were, *preached* to the church of Christ by baptism. This symbol, which is a public sign of membership in the church, and seal of the righteousness of faith, is of itself a defence against error; for it teaches impressively the necessity of internal purification by the regenerating influences of the Spirit of Christ.

But how is this washing of regeneration in the heart of the believer, and the renewing of the Holy Ghost, represented in the Scriptures? It is obvious that the external sign of this spiritual change, ought to have some analogy to the Scriptural representation of it. And in the Bible it is often represented by the terms *sprinkling* and *pouring*, never by *dipping* or *immersing*. Thus the Lord says by the mouth of his prophet, Isaiah, in his promise of great spiritual blessings under the gospel dispensation,—“I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground; *I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.*” (ch. 44.) Again in Joel 2: 28, “And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh.” &c. The apostle Peter informs us that this prophecy was fulfilled by the operations of the Holy Spirit in the conversions witnessed on the day of Pentecost. The spiritual blessings so richly bestowed upon many churches at the present day were

predicted and described in the same or similar terms by the prophets.—Isaiah seeing, in prophetic vision, the increasing glories of the church under the gospel dispensation, uses similar language—“*So shall he [the Messiah] SPRINKLE many nations; (52: 15)* and by Ezekiel referring to the same events, the Lord says—“*Then WILL I SPRINKLE clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.*”

Now what analogy or resemblance has immersion to the scriptural representation of this baptism of the Holy Spirit, which seals the gospel and all its unspeakable blessings to the heart of the believer? There appears to be none; for he is not *dipped* or *immersed* in the Spirit; but the Spirit is **POURED OUT** upon him in his conversion, and this act is described by *the sprinkling of clean water*. Is not then, immersion a very inappropriate symbol of this baptism of the Holy Ghost? And is not *the sprinkling of clean water*, the very act by which it is described, a clear, significant and appropriate sign of the thing signified in this ordinance?

But it is strenuously maintained that baptism is intended to exhibit *the burial and resurrection of Christ*, and that these events can not be represented by the rite, unless performed by immersion. This opinion was originated by the misinterpretation of two passages (Rom. 6: 3, 4. and Col. 2: 12,) in which believers are said, “*to be buried with Christ in, or by baptism.*” This language, as all agree, is figurative. In explaining the figure, Dr Woods remarks that the word translated “*we were buried,*” does not relate to *living* men, but to *dead* men; not to *water*

but to *earth*. It does not mean, *we were immersed or plunged in water*, but as dead bodies, *we were interred or covered up in a grave, or laid in a tomb*. The figure of speech is the same as in the expressions used in connexion with this, in which Christians are said to be *crucified* and *dead*. It designates the character they sustain in consequence of their union to Christ. They are *crucified to the world; dead to sin*; and to make it more forcible still—*dead and buried*. And this *mortified* temper of Christians, is signified by baptism; and equally so whatever may be the mode of baptism. According to the representation of the Apostle in the context, it is as true that believers are *crucified with Christ*, and *dead with Christ in baptism*, as that they are buried with him in baptism, And as far as I can judge, there is nothing in the language employed in these passages, which implies, that baptism has any more resemblance to Christ's *burial*, than to his *crucifixion or death*."

"In Gal. 3: 27, the character of Christians is set forth in a similar way by another metaphor. "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have *put on Christ*." The metaphor is taken from the putting on of clothes. Believers *have put on Christ*; have assumed his character; have *invested or clothed* themselves with his moral excellence, as one covers himself with a garment. And this is signified by their being baptized into Christ." Now is it not as reasonable to infer from this passage that the *mode* of baptism must have a resemblance to *the putting on clothes*, as to infer from the other, that it must resemble the *burial* of Christ? The metaphors are similar, and the former inference as to the mode of baptism has

the same support from scripture that the latter has.—Both are equally unsupported; and from a fair interpretation of the texts from which it has been supposed that baptism is a symbol of *Christ's burial and resurrection*, I hesitate not to affirm, that *this opinion is unauthorized by scripture*.

There is another objection to this opinion. I can not conceive that the symbol has any thing like a resemblance to the event thought to be symbolized; that an *immersion* in water can represent an interment as practiced in Judea. The sepulchre in which the body of Christ was laid, was a chamber excavated in a rock. The body was wrapped in clean linen, and probably deposited in a niche in the side of the chamber. Now what resemblance is there between an *immersion in water*, and the *carrying and depositing a dead body in a chamber of this kind*? Surely, the analogy here is very faint, so faint that it makes large claims on the imagination, to view an immersion as a symbol of the burial and resurrection of Christ.

Baptism, then, is a plain, though symbolical, representation of the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating the heart of the believer. And as this work is described by the terms *pouring* and *sprinkling*, by the inspired writers—the sprinkling of clean water is obviously the most appropriate symbol of it.—And the application of a small quantity of water in this way does, as I have before remarked, as really and truly represent *internal purification*, as the application of a large quantity, or an immersion. The dipping and washing of the whole body is not prescribed in the Scriptures to symbolize this change. This can not be maintained—and is not, so far as I know, pretended. The *external* washing, or purification, of the

whole body is not necessary as a symbol of the washing of regeneration. If it were necessary, there must be not merely the dipping of the body under water, but *a literal washing of it*, while in the water, till the whole shall be thoroughly cleansed.

In considering the design and meaning of this ordinance, I must repeat the remark, that the word *baptize*, (*βαπτίζω*) is used in the New Testament to express something more than the mode. This might be inferred from its original sense. The *primitive* and *literal* meaning of *baptize*, (of both *βαπτω* and *βαπτίζω*) is not as has often been asserted, on the authority of some modern lexicon, to *plunge*, or *immerse*, but to *DYE*, or *COLOR*. In proof of this, it is sufficient to refer the Greek scholar to a Lexicon like that of Scapula, where words are etymologically arranged. In such a work he may find more than twenty derivatives from this word, the signification of which decides the question concerning its original meaning beyond all ground of dispute.* These derivatives all have reference to dying. To dye or color, then, is unquestionably the *original* meaning of the word under consideration.

* The following are some of these derivatives; *βαππα*, a tincture or dye; *Βαψίς*, the act of dying; *βαπτος*, dyed; *Βαπτρία*, a female dyer; *βαπτικός*, that which may be dyed; *Βαφή*, a color, a tincture; *Βαφικός*, that which relates to dying; *βαφεύς*, a dyer; *αβαφος*, not dyed; *αίμοβαφης*, dyed with blood; *ακροβαφης*, dyed on the top; *δρυοβαφης*, dyed with oak; *χρυσοβαφης*, tinged with gold, &c. &c.

In the process of dying the tincture or coloring matter is communicated to that which is dyed. So in baptism; the rite signifies the communicating of a moral complexion to the mind—the imbuing of it with holy principles. It also imposes obligation, and binds to the performance of duty, and this is expressed by *baptize* as used in the New Testament. John baptized “with water unto repentance;” (Mat. 3: 11) i. e. the subjects of his baptism in receiving the rite, publicly professed to believe the *doctrine* of repentance, and bound themselves to perform its duties.—The children of Israel, the Apostle tells us, “were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” By passing with him through the Red Sea, as led by the cloud, they professed to be his followers, and bound themselves to honor and obey him as their leader, and to obey the laws and institutions which he introduced for their observance. So in the baptism of a believer in Christ, into, or unto “the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost;” the act implies that on his part he has cordially received, or that he will thus receive, the laws and precepts of Jehovah as the rule of his life; and by this rite he is bound to devote himself supremely to God—to honor and glorify God by submission to his authority, cordially believing the truths and performing the duties revealed in the Holy Scriptures. It is in this sense with the idea of obligation that the word is used metaphorically. The apostle addressed the Christians at Rome, as those who had been “*baptized* into the death of Christ.” That is, by this rite they bound themselves to follow Christ, to imitate his example; to crucify their sins; thus putting them away to honor Christ: as he for their sakes

had been crucified, putting away his own life.—In like manner, Christians are said (1 Cor. 12: 13) to be *baptized* into one body; i. e. by *baptism* they become members of the church, which is Christ's mystical body, and bind themselves to obey the laws which Christ has given his church.

From these passages of Scripture, which illustrate the nature of the ordinance, it is evident that the word, *baptize*, expresses a great deal more than the *mode* of administering the rite; that the word is used with great latitude. Its original sense is *to dye*; in the New Testament it is frequently used in the sense of *washing* or *cleansing*. And you will not infer from what I have said, that it denotes a *partial* washing. On the contrary, when used to signify the ordinance of baptism, it denotes an *entire washing*—the washing of regeneration by which the heart is cleansed from the pollutions of sin by the agency of the Holy Spirit. And this *entire* washing, this purification of the heart, is more appropriately represented by *sprinkling* water than by immersion, for this very act furnishes language which the Holy Ghost uses in speaking of his influences on the heart of the Christian.

IV. The administration of this rite by immersion, where this is made the *exclusive* mode, APPEARS TO BE THE OCCASION OF AN *undue* RELIANCE ON A MERE ORDINANCE IN THE CONCERN OF SALVATION. And this circumstance, in my view, is a *strong* reason against adopting it as the usual mode of baptism. I do not say that my respected brethren, who adhere to this mode exclusively, do in *principle* lay a dangerous stress on their form of this rite; but the tendency of their practice on the minds of some of their hearers,

leads them to regard it as a *weighty matter of the law*, without the performance of which there is no salvation. Such views I believe to be eminently dangerous. When the sinner is looking so intensely to an external ordinance as a term, or the means, of his acceptance with God,—his mind is withdrawn from things more important—from the depravity of his own heart which an ocean can not wash away; from the nature of that faith and repentance by which the heart is regenerated and reconciled to God; from the spirituality of the gospel, from the extent and purity of those laws which are the measure of his duty, and should now be the rule of his life. While he views an external rite as an indispensable condition of being admitted to the Lord's table or to the communion of the church of Christ, he will be liable to regard it as the condition or terms, on which pardon and salvation are dispensed.

Let me not be misunderstood. I am not arguing that baptism is an *unimportant* rite. In my view nothing is unimportant, which Christ has appointed for the observance of his church. And the great truths, signified by this rite, are unspeakably important, and ought ever to be held out prominently before the church and the world. The rite itself, then, is important as the symbol of these truths. It is important,—not on account of any grace it confers or procures; for it confers none, and contains no virtue in itself,—but on account of that which it denotes. But its importance does not lessen the danger of regarding it as the means of salvation. And when a *particular mode* of it is considered as the indispensable condition of an approach to the Lord's table; then it seems to be

converted into something more than a sacred ordinance: Then it appears to hold that place which the gospel assigns to repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

But you will ask—"are persons to be admitted to the Lord's Supper who have not been baptized?" I answer—Yes,—if they give evidence of union with Christ and obey Him as their Lord. And they may be regenerated, and give this evidence, and still be unable to believe it a duty to be baptized in that particular manner, which some Christians may regard as the *only* baptism. The case of the Quakers may serve to illustrate this remark. While I regard their views of the external rites of religion as erroneous, I would not object to the admission of their pious members to the Lord's Supper, because they had not been baptized. Giving evidence by their lives of Christian character, of having been baptized by the Holy Ghost; I would not, I *could* not consistently with my views, forbid them to commemorate with me the sufferings and death of our common Lord and Saviour. With hearts enlightened on the subject of their lost state by nature, the necessity of the regenerating and sanctifying influences of the Holy Spirit, with deep repentance for sin as committed against God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I should consider them fit persons to go with me to the Lord's table; although they were not so far enlightened in respect to the externals of religion as to see it their duty to receive baptism in *any* way. To forbid them, might afford proof that I was regarding an external rite to be of as high importance, as the change of heart which it signifies.

This undue reliance on an external ordinance has a most unhappy effect on religious character. It nourishes a self-righteous spirit—the very religion most natural to the unregenerate heart. We may see its tendencies illustrated in the history of most religions. The Jews in the time of our Saviour were so much engrossed in tithing their anise and cummin and attending to the other externals of their religion, that they entirely overlooked faith and mercy—the very essentials of that religion which their prophets taught. The importance which they attached to their rites, rendered them notoriously self-righteous. The musselman after performing the rites prescribed by the Koran, or making a pilgrimage to Mecca, enjoys the same spirit of complacency in his works. The poor, deluded pagan, when offering a costly sacrifice to his god, or lacerating his flesh, places a similar reliance on the supposed virtues of his ceremonies. In the externals of popery this self-righteous spirit predominates—the consequence attached to external rites casts the truths, incorporated with that corrupt system, entirely into the shade. The essentials of religion appear to be utterly forgotten amidst the splendid rites which are regarded as the gate of paradise. And are protestants in no danger of indulging the same spirit? May they not be led almost imperceptibly to view an external rite as something meritorious? May they not almost unconsciously suppose that there is a kind of virtue in *this particular mode* of an ordinance, which admits to the Lord's table and to heaven—while another mode which thousands of enlightened Christians conseientiously believe to be Scriptural, is in their view connected with no such privileges?—And there is

the greater danger here, if the rite in question be considered of a humiliating character, or if it require the exercise of great self-denial. That which costs so much in the performance, though it be a mere ceremony, may at length be regarded as an important means of procuring the favor of Heaven.

But I must close this letter, already protracted to a greater length, than intended when I commenced it.—Other considerations against the practice of immersion for baptism have been suggested, but I can not state them here: and my remarks on the proper subjects of this ordinance I must defer till I have a more favorable opportunity.—In conclusion, I would refer you again to *the Word of God*, as an infallible guide on this as on other questions of duty. And it becomes us to bear in mind, while forming our decisions, that we must give an account for our opinions as well as for our actions at the tribunal of our final Judge.—And whatever views we may adopt as the result of sincere inquiries on this subject, let us more earnestly seek the baptism of the Holy Ghost, that we may cherish that love toward those who differ from us, which is the bond of perfectness, and by which the world may know that we are the children of God.

Yours truly, &c.

H.